

The Leadership Cliff

A Playbook for Retaining
Women at the Top

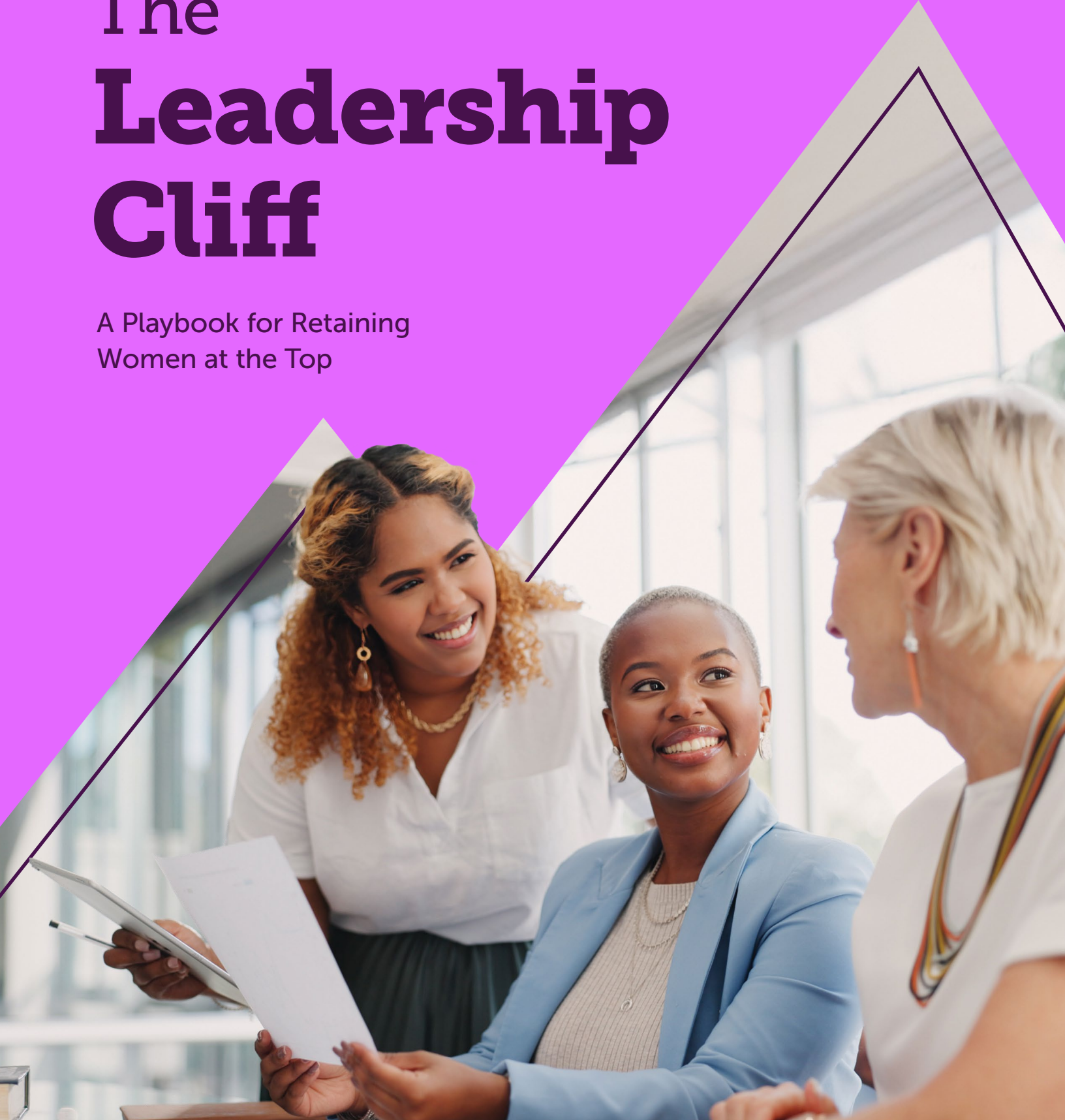




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Introduction

The State of Women in the Workforce

The year 2026 marks a make-or-break moment for women in the workforce. After years of incremental progress, the data now points to a startling pattern executives can no longer ignore: Women are leaving the workforce—and leadership pipelines—at alarming rates.

In the first half of 2025, nearly 500,000 women left the U.S. workforce, marking the steepest decline in more than forty years ([Prewitt & Heggeness, 2025](#)). According to analysis of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data by the University of Kansas, mothers of young children made up the bulk of this group. In addition, more than 97% of working mothers surveyed last year say they would stay longer at organizations that meaningfully support working motherhood, yet 40% still leave after having a baby, most within the first year ([Executive Moms, 2026](#)).

At the same time, the gender pay gap widened for the second consecutive year after narrowing slightly for decades, with women earning 81 cents for every dollar earned by men, down from 83 cents the year prior ([Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2025](#)). For context, the 2025 data mirrors the same numbers captured 20 years earlier, and the 2025 drop is the worst witnessed since 1966.

What's happening today is not a market fluctuation or an economic anomaly; rather, it's a workplace design failure grounded in systems that perpetuate inequities in promotion and talent retention.

Good Intentions Aren't a Workforce Strategy

“**Good intentions are not enough.** Without redesigning our institutions, even well-meaning people will continue to produce biased outcomes.”

Iris Bohnet, [What Works: Gender Equality by Design](#)

Inside organizations, advancement has also slowed. For the eleventh consecutive year, women remain underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline, but women in entry-level roles and senior-level roles feel this strain the most ([McKinsey and Lean In, 2025](#)). Women hold approximately 29% of C-suite roles, unchanged from 2024.

McKinsey and Lean In's 2025 "[Women in the Workplace](#)" report argues that these statistics amount to a growing "ambition gap," finding that women report wanting promotions less than men. To be clear, these trends don't suggest a lack of ambition; what they demonstrate is that women are opting out of workplaces that have become structurally incompatible with how work and performance actually happen.

The Motherhood Penalty Is Measurable

“Employed mothers in the United States suffer a per-child wage penalty of approximately 5%. [...] **Compared to fathers, mothers were offered approximately 8.6% lower salaries.**”

Correll et al., "[Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?](#)"

These trends are unfolding amid renewed return-to-office (RTO) pressure. Following an [executive order](#) in January 2025 that forced federal employees back to the office five days a week, companies such as Amazon, JP Morgan, AT&T, and several others followed suit, marking July with the highest post-pandemic RTO rates ([Business Insider, 2025](#)). And yet, overwhelming evidence finds hybrid work sustains productivity while increasing factors such as employee well-being and engagement ([Bloom et al., 2024](#); [Van Dijke et al., 2024](#)).

The implication for leaders is clear: This is not merely a "women's issue." It's a leadership, retention, and business-continuity crisis. When organizations lose top talent, they lose institutional knowledge, customer insight, operational continuity, succession strength, and the diverse perspectives that fuel innovation. Organizations that redesign work, advancement, and listening systems can stabilize leadership pipelines and reduce succession risk. Those that delay will be forced to compete for a shrinking pool of experienced talent.

This paper examines four workforce patterns behind this pipeline that is being drained and outlines what leaders must do now to respond before today's exits lead to permanent talent shortages.

“

The System, to a large extent, causes its own behavior ... **Structure influences behavior.**”

Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*



Four Central Workforce Patterns





Pattern 1:

RTO Reshapes Who Stays and Who Advances

While often framed as a necessary productivity reset, RTO mandates are not solving a performance problem. Instead, they are creating a retention problem, accelerating the very losses leaders say they want to prevent. Research shows that RTO policies at major U.S. employers—including Microsoft, SpaceX, and Apple—triggered the departure of senior talent in 2024, particularly among women, weakening leadership capacity and workforce performance ([Van Dijke et al., 2024](#)).

Across organizations, firms that imposed RTO mandates experienced an average 13% increase in employee turnover, with the strongest effects among women, senior leaders, and highly skilled employees ([Ding et al., 2024](#)). Given that replacing a single departure can cost anywhere from 50% to 200% of an employee's annual salary, these exits compound losses of institutional knowledge, leadership readiness, and competitive advantage ([SHRM, 2025](#)).

On the flip side, well-designed hybrid work consistently shows the upside of flexibility. [McKinsey](#) finds that 83% of employees say flexible work allows them to work more efficiently and productively, while an [MIT Sloan Management Review survey](#) reports that 61% of HR leaders believe hybrid work has improved productivity. What's more, a [study conducted by Stanford researchers](#) of more than 1,500 employees found that hybrid work improved job satisfaction and reduced attrition by one-third, with no loss in productivity when compared to fully in-office models over two years of review.

Women—particularly those navigating caregiving demands—benefit significantly from flexible arrangements and are far less likely to exit when hybrid options are available. In this context, flexibility is no longer a perk or policy choice; it is a business imperative for retaining experienced talent and stabilizing leadership pipelines.

Flexibility Is a #1 Priority

Across countries and industries, 63% of working mothers ranked flexible work as the most important factor for long-term professional sustainability, even above paid leave.

Executive Moms, "[The Future of Working Motherhood 2026](#)"

Offering hybrid work alone, however, is not enough. An equally consequential issue is how flexibility is treated once it exists. [McKinsey and Lean In's research](#) shows that women are more likely than men to rely on flexible or hybrid arrangements, yet women working in flexible arrangements are paid and promoted at lower rates than men in comparable arrangements. They report less access to sponsorship, fewer stretch assignments, and reduced visibility in advancement decisions, even when performance is similar.

When Flexibility Becomes a Career Penalty

Entry-level women are far more likely to work remotely and when they do, they are also 33% less likely to be promoted than women at their same level who work in person. Entry-level men, in contrast, are promoted at similar rates to their in-person peers regardless of where they work.

McKinsey and Lean In, ["Women in the Workplace"](#)

RTO Is Now a Retention and Continuity Risk

Hybrid work improves retention by one-third with no productivity loss. Rigid RTO policies reverse that advantage, accelerating preventable exits and destabilizing leadership pipelines.

Bloom et al., ["Hybrid working from home improves retention without damaging performance"](#)

When designed poorly, hybrid work can create a structural double bind. If flexibility is reduced through rigid RTO mandates, women are more likely to exit. When flexibility remains available but is penalized, women are more likely to stall. Either way, organizations lose experienced talent and weaken leadership continuity. The result might not appear as an immediate productivity loss, but it will metastasize into gradual erosion of the leadership pool.

RTO, then, is not simply a question of where work happens.

It is a decision about who is rewarded, who is visible, and who is positioned to lead.

Pattern 2:

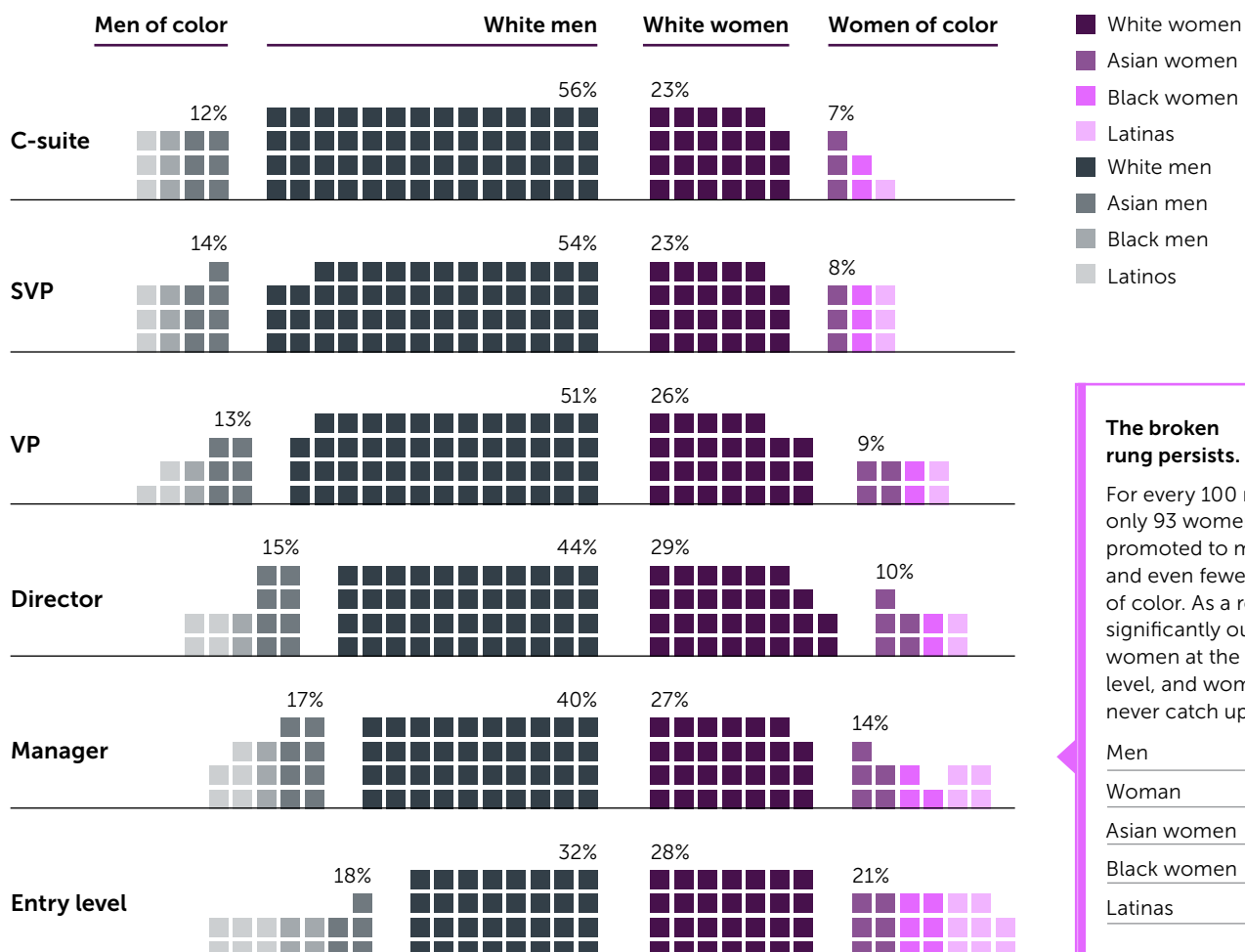
The Leadership Pipeline Is Being Quietly Drained

Women's underrepresentation in senior leadership is often framed as a slow-moving pipeline issue. A more accurate description is a persistent drip—driven by how advancement systems actually operate—reflecting a pipeline that's about to burst.

FIGURE 1

State of the corporate pipeline at the start of 2025

Employees by gender and race by level on January 1, 2025. Each square equals 1% of representation.



Source: McKinsey and Lean In, ["Women in the Workplace,"](#) 2025.

Women are promoted to manager at lower rates than men and are less likely to receive active sponsorship, limiting access to high-visibility roles and future advancement.

Decades of organizational research explain why this pattern persists. Women enter the workforce highly prepared, outperforming men academically and earning a higher percentage of college degrees ([Pew Research Center, 2024](#)). Women encounter their first and most consequential barrier almost immediately: The transition into management stalls despite equal performance and aspiration compared to their male peers, a phenomenon widely referred to as the “broken rung” ([Ellingrud et al., 2025](#)).

The data also shows that not all women face the same advancement risk; mothers encounter additional structural barriers that slow leadership progression. Studies show that mothers are evaluated as less competent and less committed than non-mothers with identical qualifications, slowing advancement even when performance does not change ([Correll et al., 2007](#)). At the same time, women, especially mothers, are disproportionately asked to take on non-promotable work, essential tasks that support teams and culture but rarely translate into promotion or pay ([HBR, 2018](#)).

Another issue is advocacy. Research shows that leaders who advance are those actively advocated for in closed-door decisions, yet women receive less sponsorship than men at comparable levels ([Chow, 2025](#)). Without that advocacy, performance alone is often insufficient to propel advancement.

These dynamics help explain why an “ambition gap” has emerged in recent survey data. What appears as declining interest in promotion is more accurately a reassessment of return on effort. When leadership roles require constant availability, visibility, and unfair work expectations, many women conclude that the cost of advancement outweighs the payoff.

When leadership pipelines inside organizations narrow, high-capability women increasingly choose to build elsewhere rather than wait for systems to catch up. By the time gaps appear at the top, the system likely has been filtering women out for years.

Advancement Is a Design Outcome

20%

of organizations surveyed last year say they are placing little or no priority on women’s career advancement; that number rises to 30% for women of color.

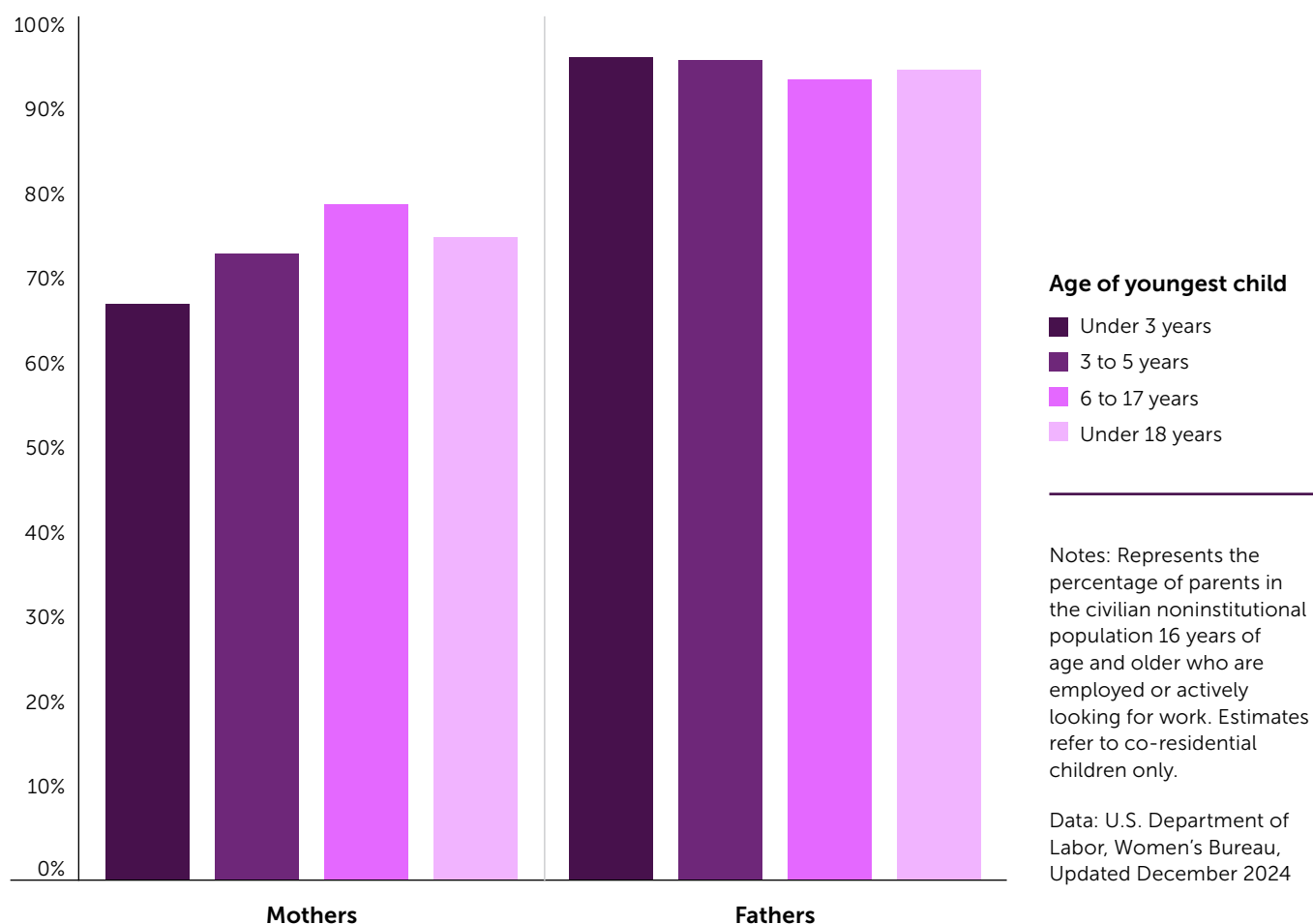
McKinsey and Lean In,
[“Women in the Workplace,” 2025](#)

Pattern 3:

Caregiving Is a Structural Pressure Point

Caregiving is not a peripheral factor in women's workforce exits—it's a breaking point. Participation declines are not evenly distributed across women and men; they cluster at predictable life stages where caregiving demands peak and work systems remain least adaptable.

FIGURE 2
Labor Force Participation by Caregiving Status



Source: [U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2024.](#)

Declines in workforce participation are concentrated among mothers of young children, while participation among fathers and women without young children remains comparatively stable.

Caregiving pressures have intensified since the pandemic, and they extend well beyond early childhood. Childcare costs have risen, availability remains uneven, and eldercare responsibilities are expanding as the population ages. One in every four U.S. adults is a caregiver, representing nearly a third of the “sandwich generation,” or those caring for both children and aging parents, with women comprising the majority ([AARP, 2025](#)). When assumptions of capability collide with caregiving reality, strain accumulates quickly, even for high-performing, highly committed women.

Reentry from parental leave is a particularly fragile moment. Research on working motherhood shows that return to work is rarely treated as a transition requiring intentional design ([Sumpter et al., 2024](#)). Instead, expectations often reset immediately to pre-leave norms, even as employees navigate physical recovery, sleep disruption, new caregiving logistics, and changes in capacity. Without structured reentry planning, explicit workload recalibration, and consistent manager support, the burden of adjustment falls almost entirely on the individual.

While it might be tempting to frame this issue as one of disengagement, across multiple studies, working mothers and caregivers consistently report strong commitment and a desire to remain in the workforce. What changes is not ambition but rather tolerance for systems that require endurance rather than sustainability.

Caregiving-related exits disproportionately affect mid-career women, the population that anchors management layers and feeds senior leadership pipelines. Caregiving, then, is not a niche issue or a benefits conversation; it is an early warning signal of pipeline risk.

The Hidden Cost of Caregiving

With caregivers at heightened risk for cardiometabolic disease, obesity, isolation, depression, and anxiety, caregiving costs to employers are estimated to be as high as

\$33 billion

annually due to absenteeism and retention issues.

[HR Executive, 2026](#)

Pattern 4:

Why Organizations See Attrition Too Late

Most organizations believe they understand talent risk because they track turnover, engagement scores, and attendance. In reality, these are lagging indicators, signals that surface only after key decisions have already been made.

Women's exits are rarely abrupt. They are typically preceded by a period of mounting strain: stalled advancement, reduced sponsorship, and a growing sense that effort no longer translates into opportunity. Survey-based research on working motherhood shows that many women seriously consider leaving months before they act, particularly during reentry or following changes to flexibility and expectations ([Executive Moms, 2026](#)). By the time attrition appears in workforce data, the underlying conditions are often already entrenched.

Attrition Is a Lagging Indicator

By the time women leave, the conditions driving their decision have often been in place for months. The failure is one of visibility, which is fixable.

Measurement practices compound the problem. Annual engagement surveys and high-level sentiment metrics rarely capture where and when risk is concentrated, such as after return from leave, during prolonged periods without sponsorship, or when flexible work carries unspoken penalties. Organizational research shows that perceived fairness, psychological safety, and access to advocacy are leading indicators of retention, yet these signals are often invisible in standard dashboards ([Edmondson, 2018](#); [Gallup, 2024](#)).

For leaders, this creates a false sense of stability. Teams perform and roles remain filled, even as leadership pipelines are diminished. Organizations that rely solely on lagging metrics intervene too late and absorb avoidable losses. Those that build earlier visibility into strain, sponsorship gaps, and advancement confidence are far better positioned to act before exits are accelerated.

Why Leaders Must Act Now

The Risks Behind the Data

What appears as an individual exit or stalled progress is, in fact, a systemic leadership risk with compounding business consequences. Women's attrition accelerates additional business risks: leadership roles go unfilled longer, remaining leaders absorb more scope, burnout rises, and teams lose stability at precisely the levels required to execute change. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of overload and attrition that weakens performance well beyond the initial exits.

Organizations that fail to intervene early face these challenges:

- ▶ **Retention risk:** preventable exits among experienced, high-performing talent
- ▶ **Productivity risk:** rising burnout, disengagement, and reduced discretionary effort
- ▶ **Leadership risk:** reduced succession benches and stalled executive readiness
- ▶ **Financial risk:** compounding costs from turnover, backfilling, and lost momentum

The **HR Executive** **Leader** Playbook

What Leaders Must Do Now to
Protect Performance and Retention



Play 1:

Redesign Hybrid Work as a Retention and Productivity Strategy

Why This Matters

Hybrid work design has become a leading indicator of leadership stability. Poorly designed RTO expectations erode retention and leadership continuity quietly, while intentional hybrid models help sustain performance and succession strength.

What Leading HR Teams Do

Leading organizations don't treat RTO as a top-down mandate. Instead, they redesign hybrid work to support performance and retention:



They design structured flexibility instead of imposing blanket mandates.

Leading teams establish clear enterprise guardrails while giving business units and teams autonomy to decide when in-person work adds the most value ([Seramount, 2025](#)). In-office expectations are tied to collaboration, customer impact, and role requirements—not optics.



They equip managers to lead for outcomes, not visibility.

HR leaders invest in hybrid leadership capability, training managers to counter proximity bias—or the belief that presence equates to productivity—and shift away from time-and-presence signals ([Seramount, 2024](#)). Performance conversations focus on results, collaboration quality, and team connectedness.



They align productivity measurement to how work actually gets done.

Instead of using attendance as a proxy, these organizations track indicators that predict performance and retention: engagement, burnout risk, and collaboration. Deep employee listening helps leaders see where hybrid models are working—and where strain is quietly building ([Seramount, 2026](#)).

CASE IN POINT

Trip.com: Boosting Productivity Through Hybrid Work Design

Well-designed hybrid work models can boost retention without sacrificing productivity. A rigorous, randomized, controlled trial of hybrid arrangements involving 1,612 employees at Trip.com found that offering hybrid schedules (with at least one day of remote work per week) reduced resignations by 33%. Women, non-managers, and employees with long commutes benefited the most from flexibility and were the least likely to quit when their in-person days were cut to at least three days a week. Trip.com saw zero measurable decline in productivity and saved the company millions in reduced attrition.

This evidence challenges the assumption that increased in-office presence is required to keep talent engaged and performing. Instead, it shows that hybrid work, when intentionally structured and evaluated on outcomes rather than presence, can strengthen employee retention, especially among those most at risk of disengagement or exit, offering a data-backed rationale for organizations to rethink rigid RTO policies.

33%

Percentage of resignations reduced by offering hybrid schedules

0%

Measurable decline in productivity

Play 2:

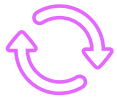
Rebuild Leadership Pipelines

Why This Play Matters

Leadership pipelines don't fail at the top—they are drained quietly much earlier. When advancement feels opaque, inconsistent, or incompatible with real work demands, high-potential talent slows down, disengages, or exits altogether. Over time, this creates leadership gaps that surface only when it's expensive to fix them.

What Leading HR Teams Do Differently

Leading organizations recognize that leadership pipelines are built—or broken—by design. Rather than relying on individual grit or informal networks, they take the following system-level actions:



They make advancement predictable and explicit.

Effective talent pipelines depend on clear, consistent criteria for promotion and advancement. Research emphasizes the importance of transparent promotion frameworks tied to specific competencies and business objectives rather than ad hoc decision-making, which reduces ambiguity and supports engagement and retention ([HBR, 2024](#)).



They protect advancement momentum during critical transitions.

Rather than treating reentry from leave, role changes, or work-model shifts as neutral events, leading teams recognize them as high-risk moments for pipeline leakage. Proactive succession planning research shows that systematic talent assessment and development throughout the leadership pipeline are associated with stronger internal readiness and continuity, reducing risk from unexpected gaps or stalled progression ([HBR, 2025](#)).



They hold leaders accountable for pipeline health.

Leading organizations treat leadership bench strength as a business outcome, not an HR aspiration. Leaders are evaluated on successor readiness and talent development—not just results—ensuring pipeline building is embedded in how leadership performance is measured and rewarded.

CASE IN POINT:

Cognizant—Rebuilding Leadership Pipelines by Design

A leading business and technology consultancy, Cognizant, launched a women's leadership development program, "Propel," for mid- and senior-level leaders across the globe in partnership with Center for Creative Leadership. Recognizing that informal networks and ad hoc approaches were insufficient in building inclusive advancement pipelines, the initiative was designed to equip senior leaders with leadership capabilities, global exposure, and professional development opportunities tailored to real organizational challenges.

Rather than treating leadership development as a one-off training or networking perk, Cognizant integrated Propel into its broader leadership development academy, embedding structured components such as targeted workshops, skill-building modules, and opportunities to practice leadership in high-impact contexts. This intentional design aimed to ensure that women leaders moved into decision-critical roles with both readiness and visibility.

Cognizant's approach illustrates a key lesson for HR leaders:

Leadership pipelines are strengthened when development is systematic, visible, and tied to strategic talent outcomes, not left to informal influence or individual initiative.

Organizations that invest in structured advancement pipelines are better positioned to retain high-potential talent and cultivate leadership readiness across diverse populations.

Play 3:

Treat Caregiving as Workforce Infrastructure

Why This Matters

Caregiving strain reliably predicts mid-career exit, stalled advancement, and burnout, weakening productivity and leadership continuity. Because caregiving spans life stages—from young children to aging parents—organizations that fail to plan for it absorb the cost through disengagement, absenteeism, and avoidable turnover.

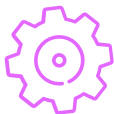
What Leading HR Teams Do

Leading HR teams treat caregiving as a predictable workforce condition—with material implications for productivity, retention, and leadership continuity—and design systems accordingly ([Seramount, 2025](#)).



They support reentry—whenever it happens.

Leading HR teams treat reentry as a predictable risk point, not only after parental leave but following any caregiving disruption, including eldercare, medical events, or family crises ([HBR, 2024](#)). They plan for it explicitly through phased reentry, workload recalibration, and structured career and sponsorship check-ins within the first 60–90 days. Reentry is managed as a transition to stabilize performance and momentum, not as a signal of diminished commitment.



They invest in infrastructure that reduces disruption.

Rather than relying on employee resilience or ad hoc manager discretion, these organizations provide practical supports that stabilize attendance and performance, including paid caregiver leave, backup and dependent-care resources, employee resource groups (ERGs) ([Seramount, 2024](#)), and caregiver-specific employee assistance program services ([SHRM, 2022](#)). These investments reduce last-minute absences, protect focus, and preserve team continuity during periods of heightened caregiving demand.



They remove career penalties tied to flexibility.

Critically, leading organizations make it explicit—through promotion decisions, role assignments, and manager expectations—that using flexibility, caregiver leave, or dependent-care resources does not count against leadership potential. Leaders are evaluated on outcomes, not availability or visibility signals, preventing the quiet penalties that drive mid-career attrition and weaken succession pipelines.

CASE IN POINT:

UPS—When Caregiving Is an Operational Reality

UPS expanded its emergency backup childcare program after identifying caregiving disruptions as a key driver of unplanned absences and frontline turnover. According to the company, 80% of eligible employees participated and used the service more than once, which prevented more than 120 unplanned absences during the pilot phase. In addition to overall retention improvement, the program supported improved retention rates specifically among parents in the program compared to shift workers at large in the same building.

Importantly, the program wasn't launched as a workplace perk but as a way to address operational risk. By improving caregiving reliability, the company reduced last-minute schedule disruptions, protected productivity on the front line, and retained experienced employees in hard-to-staff roles. Based on these results, UPS expanded the program to include additional locations.

UPS's experience illustrates a broader lesson for HR and operations leaders:

When caregiving disruptions are treated as a workforce reliability issue, targeted support can deliver measurable gains in attendance, retention, and business continuity.

80%

of eligible employees participated and used the service more than once

120+

unplanned absences were prevented during the pilot phase

Play 4:

Move from Lagging Metrics to Early Warning Signals

Why This Matters

When organizations miss early warning signs, the financial impact escalates quickly. By the time attrition appears in turnover reports, the underlying drivers—burnout, stalled advancement, and loss of trust—have often been present for months. This delay undermines productivity, destabilizes leadership pipelines, and forces reactive, high-cost interventions. The challenge isn't a lack of data. It's reliance on the wrong signals.

What Leading HR Teams Do

Organizations that protect productivity and leadership continuity invest in early visibility, surfacing risk while intervention is still possible instead of reacting after leaders disengage or exit.



They track leading indicators, not just attrition.

High-performing HR teams monitor burnout risk, workload sustainability, stalled advancement confidence, and declining engagement, not just performance outcomes. Research consistently shows that burnout and disengagement are driven more by work design and collaboration overload than by individual effort, making these signals early warnings rather than personal failures ([HBR, 2023](#)).



They plan for predictable inflection points.

Retention risk reliably rises at moments such as return from leave, promotion cycles, role redesign, manager changes, and prolonged time in role. Leading organizations formalize check-ins and “stay interviews” at these points, surfacing friction while intervention is still possible rather than treating exits as surprises ([HR Dive, 2018](#)).



They act early and visibly through managers.

The differentiator isn't insight; it's response. Effective leaders rebalance workloads, clarify growth paths, and reset expectations before disengagement hardens into exits ([Seramont, 2024](#)). This makes course correction part of normal leadership practice, not a last-minute retention scramble, and aligns retention directly with business continuity and cost control.

When Workforce Strain Becomes a Productivity Risk

[Seramount's research](#) on the national mental health at work shows how workforce strain becomes a measurable productivity and retention risk when it goes unseen. In a 2025 survey of more than 1,000 U.S. employees, one-third reported moderate to high burnout, and half rated their overall well-being as average or below, with managers experiencing the highest burnout of any role level. Employees with low well-being were six times more likely to experience high burnout and twice as likely to take time off for mental health, directly affecting productivity and continuity.

The challenge is visibility. Forty-one percent of employees do not feel comfortable discussing mental health at work, and most report relying primarily on personal coping strategies rather than organizational or managerial support. As a result, strain often remains invisible until it shows up as absenteeism, disengagement, or exit. The cost of this blind spot is significant: The [World Health Organization](#) estimates depression and anxiety result in 12 billion lost working days and \$1 trillion in lost productivity globally each year.

While this research reflects the workforce broadly, women often reflect these risks first. Because women are more likely to be navigating caregiving demands, hybrid work requests, and stalled advancement simultaneously, strain accumulates earlier and more visibly. What appears first as women's burnout, disengagement, or exit is often the earliest signal of systems under stress—signals that, left unaddressed, eventually spread across teams and roles.

1/3

of employees reported moderate to high burnout

41%

of employees do not feel comfortable discussing mental health at work

Conclusion

The data in this paper points to a clear and urgent reality: Women's exits from the workforce and leadership pipelines are not isolated events or temporary fluctuations. They are early warning signals of broader system breakdowns—in work design, advancement, caregiving support, and how organizations measure productivity and performance. What appears first as women's disengagement or departure often foreshadows deeper threats to retention, succession, and business continuity. This is why the stakes are so high. When organizations lose experienced women, they lose far more than headcount.

The leadership cliff is not inevitable. It is a design problem, shaped by deliberate choices about work structure, advancement systems, and visibility into workforce experience. Organizations that act now—redesigning hybrid work, rebuilding leadership pipelines, treating caregiving as infrastructure, and moving beyond lagging metrics—can stabilize performance and retain critical talent.

The question is no longer whether women's progress is stalling. It is whether leaders will redesign the systems that determine who stays, who advances, and who leads next—before the flow within the pipeline stops completely.

The Leadership Cliff

Project Director

Stephanie Larson, PhD

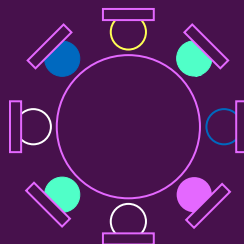
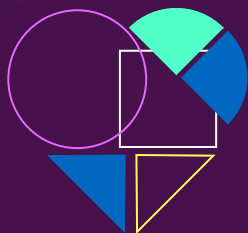
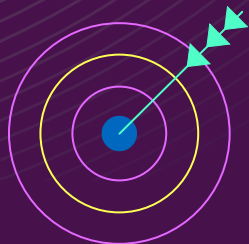
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